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Undergraduate Student Government
223 Hetzel Union Building

15–October–2005

Philip Burlingame
Associate VP for Student Affairs
222J Boucke Building

Dr. Burlingame,

Thank you for meeting with me to discuss the introduction of the Penn State Wiki. I welcome the opportunity to work with Student Affairs on productive projects, and I hope for the wiki to become a success with support from your office. Please allow me to respond to specific concerns you have raised:

[Student Benefit]
The most difficult decisions are ones that are based on insufficient information. Students across all commonwealth locations are required to register for classes based on terse descriptions from the University Registrar, experiences from friends or colleagues, and their own academic interests. The wiki will allow better–informed decisions using the last two class–selection criteria. While some students may use the additional information to 'take the path of least resistance' through academic programs, others will choose to utilize the wiki to enhance their education from the Pennsylvania State University. I believe the large majority of students will choose the latter, but in any case the university has responsibility to ensure all degree programs are academically challenging.

The wiki will also open channels of communication between student organizations and students, and allow the student voice to be heard by the university community and public–at–large. The slogan of Student Affairs is 'Making <Student> Life Better', and I believe that the Penn State Wiki fully supports this goal.

[Faculty Support]
Teaching faculty are in a unique position, as they must balance needs of the students with presentation of course material. While I can not speak for every faculty member, I posit that innovate faculty will use the wiki as a feedback mechanism for improvement of the course. As faculty will also be allowed to edit articles, they may choose to become an active participant to address course concerns as they arise. With user authentication, faculty members can contact students directly to speak privately if necessary. N.B. this is generally not possible with projects external to the university.

Even while wiki philosophy is anti–credentialist, accurate and comprehensive articles will emerge after repeated edits. A strong emphasis is also placed on

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writing objectively and recognizing individual bias—information is offered as is, no more and no less. All content on the wiki will be labeled as non–authoritative, so my expectation is that faculty will not have strong objection to the presence of this technology. Wikis are community software; they stand to bring the university back to a place for the exchange of free ideas.

[Legal Liability]
Penn State is legally responsible for the content it publishes or allows on campus networks, including digital copyright infringement, personal web pages, and private computers on the university network. The university is liable for wiki content as well, but as long as appropriate controls are in place the university is not exposed to unnecessary legal risk. Standard legal disclaimers covering copyright violation and opinion non–endorsement will mitigate the potential for lawsuits.

Penn State already has non–authenticated wikis running for classroom use, and other schools/organizations are sponsoring similar projects. While first–amendment constitutional rights are still being defined by courts, I consider a general–purpose university wiki a well–reasoned course of action.

[Student Affairs]
I have scheduled another meeting on Tuesday with Ed McGowan to discuss more technical details, in addition to effective ways to moderate and shape the wiki. I will also be available for additional meetings as needed.

I realize that this model of transparent communication runs in contrast to current practices; I am receptive to concerns the university may have. Penn State is setting precedent for other schools, and we will need to stand as one university to build a solid foundation for this project. I ask for your re–consideration and support.

Respectfully,

George Chriss
Student Resources and Concerns Chair
USG Academic Assembly

cc: Vicky Triponey, Vice President for Student Affairs

encl: Rathinasamy, Cynthia. "Assembly votes for wiki Web site." *The Daily Collegian* 5–October–2005